

## **COMMISSIONING OF THE TWELVE: AN ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 10:5-15.**

*Shelton Zimondi, O. Carm.*

### **Introduction**

Prior to Matthew 10:5-15 Jesus evidently executes his mission. The Matthean Jesus proclaims about the kingdom of heaven and heals many who are sick. He heals a leper, paralytic and the blind to mention but a few (Mat 8; 9). Hence, in chapter 10:5-15 Jesus sends his twelve disciples to further his mission. Hence, it is imperative that in this paper, I analyse the commission discourse as presented in Matthew 10:5-15 and ascertain how the disciples were to accomplish it. To achieve this aim, the work commences by looking at the term apostle as background information followed by an analysis of the passage. Thereafter, I will discuss what is in the primary texts and what the secondary literature say showing whether I agree or not to the facts highlighted therein giving justification for my position. Eventually, a conclusion will be drawn that Matthew's heightening moment in the mission discourse is his radical demand for simplicity. This simplicity would prove the value of their mission.

### **Background: Apostle**

The Matthean Jesus' commissioning of the twelve disciples not to the Gentiles nor Samaritan town but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel gives significance to what the term "twelve" means.<sup>1</sup> According to Eric Baker, the Matthean passage is the first one to associate the number twelve with the disciples and the house of Israel, which relates to the twelve tribes of Israel. In a synopsis, an apostle means to be sent. It refers to one with delegated power or authority and it would also give reference to an agent or a messenger.

The ancient Israelite tradition formally involved the use of agents or messengers (Prov 10:26; 13:17). In this respect, Craig Keener holds that such agency ultimately was endorsed a legal custom so persuasive that it was adopted by both Roman and Jewish laws especially in intermediary marriage-brokers and in betrothals.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the agent or messenger would act on the pretext of the authority granted by and on

behalf of the sender or commissioner. For that reason, Keener would say that how one treats Jesus' agents or messengers (apostles) depicts how one treats Jesus himself. Furthermore, he asserts that "similarly mistreating people's envoys was the epitome of treachery warranting severe punishment" – God's representatives are not an exception. Therefore, Jesus' commissioning of the twelve disciples implies that the ones sent are to perform not their own duties but those that their master prescribes. In the context of Keener, this subsequently follows that those mistreating the twelve warrant severe punishment since the disciples represent Jesus. Jesus' disciples are his Apostles.

### **What is happening in Matthew 10:5-15?**

The passage presents Jesus sending out the twelve disciples on a mission. Their mission is to proclaim the Good News they have received from Jesus. They are to preach that the kingdom of heaven is imminent. However, the disciples are sent not to the Gentiles or Samaritans but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v 6). They are instructed to preach as they travel. We also encounter Jesus instructing the twelve disciples on what to do and how to act along the journey. Jesus instructs them to do four things: to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demon (v 7). The Matthean Jesus gives his disciples radical demands not to carry any gold or silver or copper for their belts; not to carry a sack for the journey or a second tunic or sandals or staff (v 10). He also teaches them on how to deal with acceptance and rejection in their mission. In addition, he explains the consequences of those who either reject them or the Good News. Thus, Jesus points out clearly how both the ones sent and the recipients should act.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Matthean Jesus projects the eschatological fate of those who reject the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. However, in the passage we meet Jesus and the twelve disciples as the characters.

### **The literary context of the passage**

Prior to the commissioning of the twelve Apostles, Jesus gave them power over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every infirmity (Mat 10:1). With immediacy, Matthew lists those who have

received authority from Jesus. It is imperative to note that in Matthew chapters 8-9 the evangelist presents a powerful Jesus. He proves that Jesus is the son of David (Mat 9:27); one who heals people of their sicknesses. He is one with authority over unclean spirits – a miracle worker. Hence, in Matthew 10:1 Jesus seems to be sharing this power with his disciples. According to Daniel Harrington, the statement in chapter 10:1 that the disciples were to heal every disease and every illness connects well with Mat 9:35, which states that Jesus went around to all towns and villages proclaiming the gospel and healing every disease and every illness. As such, for him chapters 9:35-38 and 10:1-4 form an introduction to the mission discourse. In other words, the two passages prior to Matthew 10:5 introduces what unfolds in the passage under study.

Nevertheless, in the passage that follows after the mission discourse (10:5-15), Matthew presents Jesus foretelling and warning his disciples about the persecutions they are to encounter in their mission. He tells them that he sends them like sheep among wolves (v 16). Therefore, they are to meet with challenges and persecutions. Most interestingly, the post passage (10:16-25) may be seen as a second part of the mission discourse. Hence, in the second part of the mission discourse, Jesus categorically promises his disciples sufferings during the course of the mission and he explains to them that such trials and tribulations are ineluctably linked with following him.<sup>4</sup> By this Jesus shows that person and persecutions are inseparable. However, the Matthean Jesus gives the disciples two promises. First, that for the persecutions by kings and pagans the Holy Spirit will help them. Second, he promises them that amid the conflicts within the family and persecutions in the town, the Son of man would come (v 21-23). Accordingly, the literary context of the passage proves the interconnectiveness of the three passages.

### **Parallel passages**

Matthew 10:5-15 parallels with Mark 6:6-13 and Luke 9:1-6. This shows that there is information that Matthew got from Mark and where he parallels with Luke it shows that they both got it from Quelle source. But, there is some information unique to Matthew that he probably got from his special Matthean source referred to as “M” source. For example,

where Jesus say, “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give” (v 8). Matthew seems to emphasise that as the disciples got the gospel of the kingdom of heaven and the power to heal free of charge, they are to do likewise – to share it generously. Also unique to Matthew is his charge for the disciples to go not into Gentiles and Samaritan territories but rather, to the lost sheep of Israel (v 5-6). Fundamentally, the expression “the lost sheep” refers not only to one group within Israel but rather to all Israel. The Matthean Jesus also stresses the proclamation of the immediacy of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew would have got this from “Q” source and adds the emphasis of the immanency of the kingdom. Looking at the parallel between Matthew’s passage and Mark 6:9, it is evident that the former is radical on what the disciples are to carry. He prohibits food-bag, spare tunic, sandals and a walking stick, among others. Contrariwise, the Markian Jesus permits the disciples to wear sandals; this is not found in Luke chapter 9:1-6.

While Mark and Luke state the mission of the disciples as to proclaim repentance and the kingdom of God respectively, they are to heal the sick and cure them. They are also given the power over the unclean spirits as Mark states (Mk 6:7). For Matthew, the disciples are commanded to perform five duties. Namely, to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons (v 8). Perhaps, Matthew outlines these instructions to establish continuity between Jesus’ deeds and those of his twelve disciples. The disciples of Jesus are to do as their master did, heal, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons.

As highlighted earlier on, Matthew’s passage parallels with Luke 9:1-6. However, it seems that Luke begins by showing the two tasks that the disciples are to carry, that is, to heal and preach. Thereafter, he reveals what the disciples are not required to carry for the journey. In contrast, Matthew has inverted the order of the two actions with the healing coming after the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Bazzana asserts that it is like this because Matthew interprets the cure as a sign of the incoming kingdom. While Mark and Luke demands that the disciples are to carry no money, Matthew choses to list that they are to carry no gold or silver or copper for their belts. Matthew also mentions the fate of those who rejects the disciples stating that it will be worse for them than

for Sodom and Gomorrah (v 15). On this note, perhaps Matthew wants to show the eschatological aspect of the mission entrusted to the disciples. Most probably, the Matthean Jesus gives his disciples such radical demands simply because he wants it that way since Matthew has evidently shown that Jesus is powerful and he is the Son of God, he is God. Hence, God has power do whatever he wills.

### **The primary texts**

The term Cynic comes from the Greek word *Kyon* which means “dog”. The word used to refer to a group of Greek ascetics. They were called “Dogs” probably because they were wandering around towns and villages preaching. The Cynics were an ascetic group of people who had a great degree of self-discipline. People who strived for simplicity of life. However, the letter of Crates, a Cynic to the Athenians seems to provide a background of the passage under scrutiny (Mat 10:5-15). Crates in his letter states that “...do not be angry whenever you are asked for a tribology by wise men. For you are giving back not what is yours but what is theirs. This implicitly connects with Matthew’s expression that “without cost you received; without cost you are to give” (v 8). Thus, Jesus instructs his disciples to be generous with the gifts he has endowed upon them. In other words, Crates’ letter suggests that what Matthew writes in this verse is not something unique. It was being practiced in some other religious tradition.

The Cynic, Diogenes’ letter to his father Hicetas have some tenants to furnish one’s understanding of Matthew’s passage. From Diogenes’ letter, one would learn that Cynics were a religious group whose members moved around preaching. Malherbe gives evidence that they carried a wallet and a staff in their hands. The letter also suggests that Cynics were

satisfied with little – they were not people of great wealth. As Diogenes writes to his father, he expresses his satisfaction with his way of life. Furthermore, Cynics were shameless and people of no repute. All these characteristics led them to be identified as messengers of the gods.

Nevertheless, Diogenes’ letter highlights that the sending of the disciples in Matthew 10:5-15 was not first of its kind. There were some groups like the Cynics who also moved around villages and towns preaching their religion. Again, probably just as happy or ready to be send as was Diogenes

likewise is with the disciples when they are being commissioned. Perhaps, this primary text tells us about why the twelve disciples are not to carry a spare tunic or anything else (v 9-10). Given that the Cynics were carrying a staff and a wallet, it is possible that Jesus wants to distinguish his disciples from other groups of wanderers. Indeed, such radical demand would help in distinguishing them from the other groups such as the Cynics and other fraud movements. Perhaps, the distinction would help people to know the true disciples against other wanderers.

However, the aspect of the shamelessness of the Cynics seems to point out to Jesus' instruction to leave any house or village that rejects them. The disciples are not to be ashamed of rejection but to leave and find another house to stay. On a different note, Jesus might have given his disciples such instructions as in the passage simply because that is what he wants from them, especially given who Jesus proves to be in the previous chapters of Matthew. The passages prior to Matthew 10:5-15 evidently portrayed Jesus as a divine and powerful man able to heal and perform miracles, among other things. Hence, with such authority he would do as he wish. The Cynics might have been going everywhere spreading their message. On the contrary, the Matthean Jesus brings a difference. He instructs his disciples not to go into pagan territory or Samaritan town but to where he wants thus, to the house of Israel (v 5-6). Finally, one would wonder whether there is a connection or not between Matthew's passage and the Cynics as presented in the primary text. There seem to be no direct connection but nevertheless the Cynic connection cannot be entirely ruled out.

### **The secondary texts**

Keener asserts that what makes Jesus to instruct his disciples not to go anywhere else besides to the lost sheep of the house of Israel is that the disciples are not yet ready to cross cultural boundaries. On this note, Keener might be right but one would wonder why Jesus does not equip his disciples enough to be able to cross cultural boundaries considering his divine power and authority as presented by Matthew earlier on in his gospel. It is imperative to note that the central point of this passage is the clarity that Jesus sends the twelve only to the house of Israel and not to the Gentiles or Samaritans, which mirrors accurately the view of the

first-century Judaism. Nevertheless, the passage under study would be seen as a temporary restriction in contrast with Matthew 28:16-20 where after Jesus resurrected commissions his disciples to all the nations –the great commission. According to Eric Baker, this view must be dismissed, actually it is tenable that the two commissions be understood as consistent commission discourses.

Harrington argues that Matthew's thrust is on the continuity between the proclamation and Jesus' deeds and those of the twelve. He posits that the disciples are to say what Jesus said and do what he did, that is, to preach the kingdom of heaven, heal, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons. For Keener, the commission of the twelve replicates and extends Jesus' own mission on preaching and healing. This is plausible because what Jesus instructs his disciples he does it. He requests nothing new. In respect of the simplicity of life, Matthew magnifies it by making a radical demand that disciples are to take nothing even sandals or a staff. On acceptance and rejection of those sent, Matthew highlights that the recipients of the gospel are Jews and as such though being Jew if one rejects the kingdom is to be regarded as a Gentile. Thus, there is an aspect of free-will. I tend to agree with Keener on this matter because Jesus clearly instructs that the preaching and healing be for the Jews (v 6). Therefore, by choosing not to accept the gospel is a choice not to be the intended audience.

Keener brings to light that other than the Cynics there were other ancient Mediterranean people who also preached in towns and villages and practiced asceticism as a purpose of discipline. Harrington affirms this idea highlighting that the ancient Mediterranean world spread their religious teachings through missionary travelling and he asserts that the Cynics were predominantly known by their ascetic life and their street-corner oratory. Keener states that Josephus indicates that the Essenes, one of the Jewish religious groups did not carry provisions when travelling. These assertions vividly show that the way of life that Jesus demands from his disciples is not something new. Nevertheless, what is unique is the Matthean Jesus' radical stance of simplicity.

However, I would argue together with Harrington that Jesus' instruction would furnish the recipients of his disciples with what to expect from them. That is, in view of how they would conduct themselves, what would

be their priorities, whether they would ask for a fee for the gospel or not and so on. I agree with Harrington that the missionary instruction in this passage would not help only those sent but also the recipients as well. If the Matthean Jesus would not be so radical on his demand for simplicity, possibly a challenge would emerge in identifying the difference between the twelve and other Jewish groups like the Essenes.

According to Keener, the Matthean Jesus does not only prohibits taking money but even acquiring any money while on duty. I think that Jesus' demand is not partial but for the entire mission. As such, no one would be expected to acquire any money or possess what has been prohibited otherwise it would distort the whole idea of Jesus' call for radical simplicity. Therefore, Jesus' demands would perhaps accentuate the holiness of the mission. This suggests that what is of paramount significance is not simplicity but the value attached to the practice. Interestingly, Keener argues that the disciples are supposed to evangelise the community from a fixed base. This point is plausible since the passage tells us that the disciples are to stay in a house or village until they leave (v 11-12). However, it is only when they face rejection that they are to leave. Subsequently, those who reject them will be treated as spiritual pagans, not merely Gentiles but worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. In case of rejection, the disciples are not to react violently but to leave their fate to the justice of God on the Day of Judgment. Thus, Matthew situates the mission to Israel in an eschatological horizon.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has vividly shown that the Matthean Jesus sends his disciples particularly to the house of Israel and not to Gentile territory or Samaritan town. Jesus instructs his disciples on how to deal with acceptance and rejection as they execute their mission. However, the Matthean Jesus' heightening moment in this mission discourse is his radical demand for simplicity. This simplicity would prove the value of their mission.

---

<sup>1</sup> Baker, Eric. "Going only to the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel: Matthew's Gospel Tradition." Proceedings EGL & MWBS 23 (2003)79-88.

<sup>2</sup> Keener, S Craig. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*. New York: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 2009.



- <sup>3</sup> Harrington, J Daniel. *The Gospel of Matthew: Sacra Pagina Series Volume 1*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991.
- <sup>4</sup> Bazzana, B. Giovanni. "Early Christian Missionaries as Physicians Healing and its Cultural Value in the Greco-Roman Context." *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009) 232-251.
- <sup>5</sup> Malherbe, J. A, ed., "The Cynic Epistles." SBL SBS 12. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977, 76-77 & 98-99.